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Rime of the Modern Mariner

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The Rime of the Modern Mariner

One need not be an ecologist to be averse to cruise ships. Simple solicitude for human health is enough. In February of 2020, millions watched in fascination as the *Diamond Princess*, a cruise ship holding the standard capacity of 2,666 passengers and 1,045 crewmembers, was quarantined during an outbreak of coronavirus. [Novelist Gay Courter](#), a passenger who had yet to be chastened by the severity of the pandemic, called her stately cabin “a rather posh penitentiary.” The ship’s pastry chef was “the real hero” of that shutdown saga, she said. He kept her well-fed. The ship’s two-week quarantine resulted in [more coronavirus-infected passengers](#) than if they had been disembarked immediately. After the passengers were evacuated in Japan, they faced a second quarantine at Air Force bases in California, Georgia, or Texas. At least 712 of the 3,711 passengers and crew were infected, and nine died. [Mokoto Rich](#), writing for the *New York Times*, dubbed the vessel “a floating epidemiological disaster.”

A similar ordeal scared and sickened passengers aboard the *Grand Princess* on [a trip to Hawai’i](#). It embarked on its outing on February 21, 2020 – after risks from the sickness already were well known. Its 3,500 passengers, as is typical of cruise ship clientele, bent toward the upper end of the age scale, the most vulnerable epidemiologically. Officials learned, using contact tracing to track the movements of the nation’s [first virus victim](#), that she had crossed paths earlier with others who had boarded the *Grand Princess*. Test kits were dropped to the boat by helicopter to avoid contact for the medical crew. Forty-five people were tested. Nineteen crew and two passengers scanned positive, and at least one hundred more showed symptoms.

The family of one elderly passenger filed suit. Their suit said the company’s day-to-day operations demonstrated it had never contemplated or prepared for infectious diseases. Condiments were

self-served. Bridge games continued, players handling the same decks of cards every day. After the panic began, infected crew members began to deliver meals to the rooms.

One 86-year-old passenger, Rex Lawson, escaped unharmed. When his children told him they never want him to board another boat, he said it will be hard to pass up the free consolation cruise the company offered him and his wife for their distress. Mr. Lawson will have to go it alone or find another partner, though. His wife has refused to board another cruise ship again.

In a sign the pandemic will have lasting impacts both on language and on travel, Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education, likened college dormitories to the colossal holiday boats. The close quarters caused Hartle to name dorms “land-locked cruise ships.” Neither colleges nor cruise lines stand to benefit from the comparison. The big boats have come to be shorthand for everything that can be virally hazardous due to throngs.

Many American vacationers cut their travel teeth on the TV show *Love Boat*. It began in 1979. The disco beat of its theme song echoed “Copacabana” by Barry Manilow from 1978. The “Love Boat” lyrics promised more than most vacations could deliver. “Love, exciting and new,” the lyrics began. “Come aboard. We’re expecting you.” The personal touch, the direct address, proved inviting in ways few other shows had tried. “Love, life’s sweetest reward. Let it flow. It floats back to you.” The lyrics cast the ship as a moveable feast, a mobile Bali Hai, an ecosystem of reciprocal exchange. “The love boat soon will be making another run,” the song assured its listeners. For many elderly passengers, another run might be a long time coming. Even the corporations themselves admit that industry-wide changes cannot be calculated or foreseen. Carnival Corporation’s stock price fell in two months from near \$60 a share to less than \$13.

Mass-media entertainments had primed audiences to sign on for cruise-ship excursions. Ten years before *Love Boat*, in 1969, the musical fantasy film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* starred the comic actor Dick Van Dyke. That sleeper of a movie ironized cruise liners in delicious ways. Its standout song “[Posh!](#)”

riffed on the word as an acronym for “Port Out, Starboard Home.” The false etymology, the linguistic mythology, positioned savvy travelers between England and India as booking the port side going out and the starboard side coming home. Alternating the left and right sides ensured the best scenery both coming and going. The movie’s mockery of travel lies in the scene where Grandpa Potts (Lionel Jeffries) broadly struts in colonial puttees and bellows “Posh!” Aloft oversea in an outhouse, he mistakes it for a luxury state room in a seagoing vessel.

Being towed through the air by a dirigible, Potts kicks open the shithouse door and sings, “This is living, this is style, this is elegance by the mile!” Massified audiences could guffaw at the spectacle’s slapstick more readily than they could appreciate the irony of the lyrics. Potts, a delusional veteran of British India, hollers and gestures “Oh, the posh posh traveling life, the traveling life for me! First cabin and captain’s table, regal company!” Not only is he mistaking a toilet for a stateroom; he is boasting falsely and loudly about his enviable attainments. “Whenever I’m bored, I travel abroad, but I do it stylishly.” His boast foreshadowed customers of love boats like the *Diamond Princess* a half-century later, some of whom proved doomed.

The TV series *Love Boat* and the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* both brought to popular consciousness the possibility of heading out to sea for luxury short-term voyages and vacations. Duped audiences thronged to the siren call of live entertainment and all-you-can-eat buffets. In the next four decades, the largest cruise ships grew one-third longer, to 360 meters or 1181 feet; expanded their widths to 60 meters; and doubled passenger totals to an unsustainable 5,400.

Had passengers on the *Diamond Princess* or the *Grand Princess* in 2020 read Paula Becker’s account in her study *Overbooked*, they might have thought twice before signing on the line for cruises. Consumers – Becker pointed out with solid evidence – had every reason to be chafed. They bear hidden costs for drinks and gratuities, predatory pricing for bling at foreign ports of call, and starvation wages paid employees. The Carnival Corporation owns both boats.

Cruises also offend the environment by contributing to climate change. “The air pollution from just one of the docked giant ships,” Becker writes, “is the equivalent of 12,000 idling cars every day.” The average tourist cares little about pollution, of course. Part of the charm of being aboard those behemoths of the sea has to be the forgetfulness they bestow. I would not know, for I have not been on one. Patrons are encouraged to leave behind their terrestrial cares and create fantasies of love and abandon. And, of course, that is what vacations do – allow people to vacate their day-to-day concerns. Among the many forms of tourism Ms. Becker dices, she reserves the sharpest contempt for corporate cruise lines. Our hearts darken at the sight of cruise ships.

Those big boats clot ports at many of Earth’s most beautiful spots. In a figure of speech adopted by every pundit during high coronavirus time, the ships are mobile petri dishes. When travelers no longer dared to take a chance on Asia, hungry cruise lines shifted to Alaska to offer screaming deals. By early May 2020, Alaska routes also closed through summer. The methane each boat generates is always unseen. It is a greenhouse gas that “traps eighty-four times as much heat as carbon dioxide over a 20-year time frame,” the [David Suzuki Foundation](#) says. Methane’s [main causes](#) are fossil-fuel production, distribution, and use, at 33%, followed close behind by livestock farming at 27%. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; methane, not at all.

In a wishful fantasy I am not shamed to share, cruise ships would drop to the bottoms of the seas – after people were evacuated first, of course. Oxygen-deprived in their sea-floor tombs, those hulks would sequester forever the rich deposits of carbon and methane they contain. My bad scenario will never unfold, though. Each ship costs [an average of \\$260 million](#) to construct.

Nathaniel Hawthorne inspired my wishful fantasy. In his 1846 tale “[Earth’s Holocaust](#),” he imagined a busk festival. The ceremony originated with the Creek people. In that rite, useless, damaging, and outworn goods were heaped and burned. In Hawthorne’s appropriation, Anglo-Americans kindle up the fire. Americans sick of civilization hope to rid Earth of every category of injustice by incinerating symbolic objects. They begin by torching the crowns worn by royalty and the coats of arms that

aristocracies display. They conclude by kindling weaponry and other tools of mortal punishment such as gallows. The purgation brought about by the busk festival let the Indigenous people forget grudges, forgive debts, and regenerate community. Maybe the coronavirus will have positive long-term consequences that no one yet is able to foresee.

In 2020, in an image that might have arisen from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, many cruise ships became ghost ships. Turned away from port after port, they drifted in search of spots to dock. Carnival's *Costa Luminosa*, rebuffed at Savona in Italy, floated in anticipation of Italy's ports reopening. The *MSC Fantasia*, its outing cancelled, effectively held hostage its 1,338 passengers outside Lisbon in Portugal. The *MV Columbus*, owned by Cruise and Maritime Voyages in the UK, got stalled in the Andaman Sea of Thailand for weeks till it undertook 7,842 nautical miles to return its passengers to England. Once they could disembark from those ghost ships, many passengers traveled on commercial flights. In the process they endangered flight attendants and restaurant employees. Some twenty cruise liners became *navis non grata* during the period when the virus preoccupied the world. In the 1798 Coleridge poem, the ghost ship drifts through fluctuating fog and drought as penance for the mariner's having shot an albatross.

Backlash was predictable and swift against international precautions that prevented ships from docking in 2020. Merchant mariner Mikhail Voytenko tracked the outrages in his [Fleet Mon blog](#). Free-market champions like him blamed government overreach for hampering free assembly, free speech, and free trade. It was all a scheme, they said, to limit marine commerce.

Availing themselves of legal loopholes, every American cruise ship except one register in foreign nations. They license in countries with laxer laws – Liberia, Panama, Bermuda, Malta, Italy, the Netherlands. They court American customers while dodging American regulations and laws. Should catastrophe occur or a pandemic happen, remedies and rights for Americans may prove difficult to apply. Cruise lines are “[part of an industry](#) that paid an average tax rate of under 1%, which is well below the required 21% tax rate in the United States.” Nonetheless they applied for financial relief in 2020, claiming

they needed economic shelter for their employees who might be otherwise laid off. Legal scholars call foreign registries “flags of convenience.”

The phrase is fraudulent on its face. By means of legal ambiguities, the companies in fact register in jurisdictions that have lower taxes and that do not oblige them to abide by U.S. labor laws. Paula Becker, whose book *Overbooked* appeared in 2013, interviewed employees aboard the Royal Caribbean-owned ship on which she cruised. Some of those employees told her they earned only fifty dollars a month. They had to rely, accordingly, on customer gratuities to get by.

For those in the upper echelons of the cruise-line industry, there is plenty of good money to be made supplying tourists with the amenities they crave. The world’s largest cruise line, Carnival Corporation, comprises nine “brands” – AIDA, Carnival, Costa, Cunard, Holland America, Princess, P&O Australia, P&O UK, and Seaborn. Headquartered in Miami, it is incorporated in Panama. Chairman Micky Arison claimed a personal worth of \$5.3 billion USD in early 2020 and was the owner of the Miami Heat NBA team. He is also a friend of President Trump, who conscripted him in his “Great Economic Revival” industry group on April 14, 2020.

Miami-based Walker & O’Neill lawyers specialize in maritime law. “I don’t think the C.D.C. has protocols in place,” the firm’s [James Walker told](#) the *New York Times* in late March about the handling of the coronavirus crisis. “Everyone is scrambling around trying to figure things out. It seems to me kind of a Mad Hatter type of environment . . . no one is taking the lead.” Walker publishes *Cruise Law News*, a blog on “Everything Cruise Lines Don’t Want You to Know.” It dishes dirt on the love-boat industry. That dirt includes violations of air-emissions laws, illegal discharges within national parks, paint particles both on dry dock and in the water, and court-required monitoring of repeat offenders. These are only a few of the items the law firm lists. In an industry that hosts more than twenty million people every year, an apologist might rationalize that accidents will happen. A less forgiving view would hold tourism as an industry responsible – a largely unregulated trade whose various appendages are elusive. Reporting on the impacts of its segments, though, is one small way of holding that industry accountable.

In that trying spring of 2020, two Carnival cruise ships motored for a fortnight with coronavirus patients aboard. After being turned away from South American ports, they were allowed to dock in Florida following a long negotiation. Local officials feared that caring for foreigners would divert needed resources from their own region where virus cases had spiked, but finally the *Zaandam* and the *Rotterdam* received permission to vacate passengers at Port Everglades. Four elderly clients had already died on the *Zaandam*. Dozens were sick. Carnival said forty-five mildly sick passengers would stay on board, but it needed ten people to be shuttled to a hospital for care. It also acknowledged that some 6,000 of its passengers were stuck at sea, stranded and at risk of infection.

The rumble of cruise ships and the roar of jet engines were still polluting the air when Canadian editorial cartoonist André-Philippe Côté drew a seriocomic cartoon on March 18, 2020. In the foreground, a tatty bearded castaway on a desert island is pressing his back against the trunk of a single palm. His face is grim. He is trying to hide. Behind him, a cruise ship looms. Coughs emanate in French from its several decks. “Keuf! Keuf!” they sound out. “Keuf! Keuf! Keuf! Keuf!” The cruise ship carries on. The castaway manages to escape a hazardous rescue. Time will tell if the public develops the intelligence to stay away from cruise ships in the future.